DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 624 SP 028 016

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TITLE Middle Level Teacher Preparation: A Breath of Fresh Air.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Middle School Association (Columbus, OH, November 8-10, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; *Field Experience Programs; Higher Education; *Middle Schools; *Preservice Teacher Education; State Standards; *Teacher Education Curriculum
IDENTIFIERS *Saint Cloud State University MN

ABSTRACT

The Early Adolescent Block Program is offered by St. Cloud State University (Minnesota) to prepare prospective teachers for successful teaching in middle level schools. The program is a response to a Minnesota law which requires elementary or secondary school teachers wishing to teach middle school to take an additional number of courses geared toward middle school instruction. It is felt that middle school students, typically early adolescents, are unique in comparison to elementary or secondary school students and that they need to be taught differently. Middle level students also have different physical, intellectual, social, and emotional needs. The Block Program consists of 19 quarter credits of course offerings in the areas of philosophy and organization, interdisciplinary teaming, psychology, teacher experience, and special learning disabilities. The Block courses are taken during one fall semester, in which students and faculty involved in the program have continuous contact, evaluation, sharing, and feedback. (CB)

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MIDDLE LEVEL TEACHER PREPARATION: A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

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"Middle Level Teacher Preparation: A Breath of Fresh Air"

In most states teacher education programs and licensure regulations are, basically, to prepare and license teachers to teach in an elementary or secondary school. In Minnesota, elementary education majors are licensed to teach in grades one through six. Secondary education majors are licensed for a particular major(s) or minor(s) in grades seven through twelve.

To what extent do these licensing regulations allow undergraduate students to gain specific information and training in early adolescent education? This author believes that, with few exceptions, such activities are relatively non-existent.

The purpose of this article is to explain how one institution, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN has attempted to train undergraduates appropriately to be effective middle level education teachers.

In 1976 teachers in Minnesota middle schools were questioned relative to the teaching activities in which they were expected to participate for which they believed they were not trained in their undergraduate teacher preparation program. The result of this activity ultimately led to the Board of Teaching Rule 5 MCAR 3.054, Teachers in Middle Schools, which requires teachers to be licensed as middle school teachers through a twenty-four credit minimum endorsement to their original license.

This rule is clearly a statement supporting evidence which shows that early adolescents (1) are unique, when compared to elementary or secondary students; (2) need to be taught differently from students in other levels of the educational continuum; (3) need a specialized program which responds to the physical, intellectual, social and emotional needs of the individuals within the collective group; and, (4) deserve to be taught by teachers who are

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specially prepared to focus upon the unique learning needs of pupils and who can employ a variety of teaching techniques which actively involve students.

At present, Minnesota's elementary or secondary licensed graduates who teach in a middle school must, out of necessity (or survival) go through a process of on-the-job training to learn how to effectively teach students of this age group.

As good as our secondary education preparations programs are, for the most part, they are heavily oriented to subject matter specialization.

As good as our elementary education preparations programs are, for the most part, they are heavily oriented to the teacher as a child generalist.

Middle level education programs should be neither of the above, but should be a part of each. They deserve to be programs which assist prospective teachers of the age group to understand that effective teaching at this level requires building upon the successes of elementary education and, in turn, assists in preparing students for successful experiences in the senior high school.

The appropriate school housing early adolescents should be a "bridge school," assisting pupils to make a smooth transition from the elementary school to the secondary school. It would seem appropriate then, that teachers for middle level students should be trained specifically for the important role they play in the lives of early adolescents.

Although retreading or retraining a teacher can be adequate in meeting this need, a more effective process would be through appropriate pre-service programs, reducing the on-the-job training required.

The Early Adolescent Block Program, offered through St. Cloud State University is one such attempt to prepare students for successful teaching in middle level schools.

The Block is 19 quarter credits of course offerings, consisting of components required by the Board of Teaching Rule. These components are in the areas of philosophy and organization, interdisciplinary teaming, psychology, teaching experience and special learning disabilities. The courses are team taught by a faculty member of the Department of Teacher Development and one from the Special Education Department.

In addition to the 19 credit block, the Rule requires elementary education majors to fulfill 12 subject matter credits in each curricular area in which licensure is desired. Many of the courses required in the elementary education program can be used to meet this requirement. The Rule requires secondary education majors to complete developmental reading and remedial reading components in addition to the 19 credit block.

Because of the nature of the Block, particularly in the field experience component, the individual courses making up the Block have lost their individual identities, but content has been preserved. The approach is more of an on-the-job format.

Prerequisites for acceptance into the Block are that the students must have completed at least the Introduction to Elementary Education or the Introduction to Secondary Education course and be admitted to, or be in the process of being admitted to the Teacher Education Program.

During the initial several days of the quarter, the students are on campus receiving an overview of early adolescent education, developmental characteristics, appropriate programming for middle level education and preparing for the field experience component.

The Block students are engaged in a variety of laboratory experiences in a cooperating middle school in a nearby community. The faculty members who cooperate with the Block program meet with the University instructor prior to

the beginning of the Block to discuss procedures, expectations and participate in the developing of the content of the Block courses.

Each university student is assigned to a "cooperating teacher." After approximately ten days with this teacher and his/her students, the Block student is assigned to another cooperating teacher in a different curricular area.

It is felt that the Block students should not spend the entire quarter in one academic area, as this tends to perpetuate the "subject matter specialization" so typical of secondary education programs. Rather, the Block student will have a ten day field experience in as many as four different curricular areas, which include math, English, science and social studies, home economics, health, physical education, industrial arts, special education, music and art. Although the university student may request particular curricular areas, most assignments are made randomly.

Although it is difficult for the Block students to get to know so many middle school students in such a short period of time, they do remain with the students of the cooperating teacher to whom they were first assigned for purposes of Advisor/Advisee and Leisure Reading. This provides them with several experiences, including the opportunity of bonding with students and being able to observe growth over a longer period of time.

The Block students board a van supplied by the University at approximately 7:20 a.m. and arrive at the middle school by 8:00 a.m. where they have a few minutes for planning with their cooperating teacher before the beginning of the school day.

The type of experiences and the level or depth of involvement the Block student has is primarily determined by his/her feelings of competency in the particular area and the extent to which the cooperating teacher is willing to

involve them. For the most part, following a reasonable period of observation, the Block students are quite involved in small group and individual instruction. Many have the opportunity to actually prepare for and conduct a class. They assist in evaluating student performance, supervising students in a variety of settings, running errands and completing tasks for their cooperating teachers such as making copies of worksheets and the like, developing transparencies, assisting students with make-up work following absences, and developing bulletin boards.

It is considered critical to the appropriate development and training of the Block student that they experience as much as they can relative to what it means to be an effective middle level educator. They actually live the life of a teacher every day of the field experience.

Following the end of the school day, the Block students remain with their cooperating teacher for about one-half hour to make plans for the coming day. Then, they board the van for the return to campus. They have approximately seven hours of student contact each day plus an hour-and-a-half in the van sharing experiences of the day.

The field experience occurs four days each week. One day a week the Block students remain on campus for a Seminar. During this time, the discussion is relative to what they have learned, observed, questioned and challenged during the field experience. Assignments for specific observations for the next four days are also made during this time.

While in Seminar, the Block students progressively learn the complexities involved in middle level education, including a great deal of information about such middle level activities as interdisciplinary teaming, advisor/advisee programs, learning style, early adolescent intellectual, physical, social and emotional development. Students develop an interdisciplinary unit and an

affective education unit during the course of the quarter. However, the major impact of the Seminar is for reflective thinking on the part of the Block participants. They are allowed the time and the conditions to think about what they have learned, what they need to learn and to consider that they are learning things that they are not even aware they are learning. These will become more evident as the student continues on in the Teacher Education program.

The Early Adolescent Block is offered only during the fall quarter. This is done for a specific reason. Because of the timing, a highlight of the Block for the students is the opportunity to attend the National Middle School Conference or a Regional Middle Level Educator's Conference. Fund raising activities are held to provide financial support for this important activity. The students have the opportunity to meet some of the authors whose works are being studied as well as middle level educators from a wide geographic area. They are quick to share this excitement with their instructor and colleagues, especially when they are invited to apply for a teaching position by a hiring official!

The activities described in the preceding paragraphs replace or substitute for the students attending the typical formal college class. All Block activities are carefully monitored, supervised and evaluated by the university professor and cooperating middle school faculty to insure that appropriate learnings and understandings are achieved.

Student evaluation is constant and on-going. They receive feedback from the university professors on a regular basis. At the end of each 10 day assignment, in addition to daily comments, the student receives a written evaluation from the cooperating teacher describing strengths as well as pointing out areas which need strengthening.

As participants in the Block program, with many hours of student contact in the field experience component, the students gain a great deal of confidence in their individual qualities and abilities. Their decision to enter the teaching profession is confirmed and they eagerly look forward to continuing their undergraduate program.

Because of this experience, students are able to approach additional professional education components requiring field experience, including student teaching, with direction, confidence and enthusiasm.

Teaching at the middle level is not for everyone. As a result of perceptions and knowledge gained during the Block, participants are able to, with many experiential factors involved, make a conscious decision relative to whether or not they desire to apply for licensure as a middle school teacher.

This kind of early decision-making by the student diminishes the possibility of frustrating experiences upon securing a teaching position. Certainly, this is much easier on a person's mental health.

When a person chooses to teach at the middle level, fully familiar with the conditions, ramifications, and the nature of the early adolescent s/he is likely to be able to maintain her/his initial excitement and enthusiasm over an extended period of time. The potential for teacher burn-out is lessened.

As the saying goes, "You can't ever burn out if you've never been lit up!"